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ABSTRACT

This report discusses a survey conducted in the Vancouver (Canada) School District to further investigate points raised in a previous study on the advantages and disadvantages of dividing the secondary school year into two semesters. Data for the survey were gathered through discussions with subject-area coordinators and department heads and through questionnaires completed by samples of students, parents, and teachers. The student sample included only students who had experience with both semester and nonsemester systems; the parents of those students composed the parent sample. The teacher group was randomly selected from eight semestered schools; most of the teachers selected also had taught in nonsemestered schools. The majority of students, parents, and teachers preferred the semester system, but most coordinators and department heads preferred the nonsemester system. Besides presenting the survey findings, the report also discusses some other points raised in the previous report and presents a number of conclusions and recommendations on the desirability of semestering in Vancouver's schools. (JG)

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SEMESTERING IN VANCOUVER SCHOOLS

Research Report 76-04

July, 1976

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A B S T R A C T

To investigate further points raised in a previous report (Research Report 75-01), surveys of the opinions of students, parents and teachers with regard to semestering were undertaken. Representatives and coordinators of various subject areas were also asked for their comments on semestering.

The majority of the students sampled (all had attended both semestered and non-semestered schools) and their parents preferred the semester to the non-semester system. The majority of teachers also expressed this preference although some clearly favoured a ten-month teaching session for their subject. All these groups mentioned both advantages and disadvantages of semestering. Most of the coordinators and subject area representatives indicated a preference for non-semestering, however, believing that the disadvantages of semestering outweighed the advantages.

The issues of the loss of instructional time in semestered courses and the redesigning of courses are also discussed in the report. The conclusions of the study and the three recommendations are similar to those of Research Report 75-01.

SEMESTERING IN VANCOUVER SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

On July 7th, 1975, the Board of School Trustees of School District 39 received a report entitled "The Semester System in Vancouver Schools and its Effects on Curriculum" (Research Report 75-01). Although the report pointed out some of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of semestering, Board members requested further investigation of the points raised in the report, particularly those contained in the recommendations and addendum. It was further requested that surveys of the opinions of students, parents and teachers in semestered schools be undertaken and that these surveys be included in the consideration of any subsequent recommendations.

The present report discusses further attempts to examine semestering in Vancouver secondary schools. Discussions were held with coordinators and chairpersons of department heads of various subject areas and their comments are presented below. Questionnaires were also directed to samples of students, parents and teachers to solicit their views on semester and non-semester systems. In an attempt to examine informed opinion, the student sample was chosen to include only those students who had had experience with both semester and non-semester systems. The parents of these students, having also had some experience with both systems, composed the parent sample. The teacher group was selected randomly from the staffs of the eight "semestered" schools in Vancouver. Although no effort was made to select teachers who had also taught in a system which was predominantly non-semestered, more than three-quarters of the resultant sample consisted of teachers with experience in both types of systems. (An attempt was not made to select teachers who were presently in non-semestered schools but had taught in semestered schools.)

The present report is divided into five sections:

- the first section presents a summary of the surveys of students', parents' and teachers' opinions,
- the second section deals with the comments of coordinators,
- the third section deals with the comments of the chairpersons of department heads,
- the fourth section discusses some of the other points of concern raised in the previous report, and
- the last section contains a final summary, conclusions and recommendations.

I SURVEYS OF OPINIONS OF STUDENTS, PARENTS AND TEACHERS

OPINIONS OF STUDENTS

Each school was requested to prepare a list of names of senior students (i.e., in grades 11 and 12) who had had at least one year's experience in both a semestered and non-semestered school. The questionnaires were then administered to these students at each school. As might be expected, some schools (especially "non-semestered") had only a few students meeting these criteria whereas others had 20 or 30 such students.

Although two questionnaire forms were used, only slight differences in verb tense existed between forms (i.e., some students were presently attending "semestered" schools and some "non-semestered" schools). The following summary of questionnaire responses is divided according to grade and type of school now attended. The final sample sizes were as follows: 25 and 66 students were presently in Grades 11 and 12, respectively, of semestered schools (Group S), whereas 32 and 33 were in Grades 11 and 12, respectively, of non-semestered schools (Group N-S). The numbers responding to each question have been converted to percentages for most items to facilitate comparisons between groups.

Most of the questionnaire items are repeated below along with the responses. Brief comments have been added in some cases to assist the reader.

Items 1 to 4 on the students' questionnaire were concerned with the length of time a student had been at his or her present and previous school and the proportion of courses at these schools which were non-semestered or semestered. Responses to these items confirmed that, on the average, students had attended both a non-semestered and semestered school for at least a year. Responses were used also to categorize students as belonging to Group S or Group N-S.

5. If you were to compare your experience with the semester and non-semester systems (trying to keep the systems separate from the schools, teachers, students, etc.), which system would you prefer?

	GROUP N-S		GROUP S	
	Grade 11	Grade 12	Grade 11	Grade 12
Semester	53.1%	51.5%	92.0%	77.3%
Non-semester	31.3	36.4	0.0	12.1
Other	15.6	12.1	8.0	10.6

In general, the majority of all groups favoured the semester over the non-semester system. However, this preference was most obvious in the group now attending semestered schools, especially with respect to the Grade 11 students in this group. Although over one-half of the students now in non-semestered schools indicated a preference for the semester system, approximately one-third of this group preferred the non-semestered system.

Of the few students who indicated a preference for some "Other" system, most indicated that they would like to see some courses semestered and some non-semestered.

6.a) What are some of the advantages of semestering?

The comments made by both groups were similar. The most frequently mentioned advantages of semestering were:

- the opportunity to take a larger number and variety of courses in a year,
- that courses did not tend to drag and were over quicker,
- that one could repeat a failed course within the same year,
- that one could graduate earlier, and
- that work was more concentrated but on a fewer number of courses.

b) What are some of the disadvantages of semestering?

The following disadvantages were most often cited:

- courses seemed to be rushed,
- the workload was heavy,
- it was boring having the same subject at the same time every day,
- forgetting could occur with several months between courses, and
- courses do not go into as much depth. (Grade 12's, Group N-S especially mentioned this with some stressing its importance with respect to scholarship exams.)

7.a) What are some of the advantages of non-semestering?

The most frequently mentioned advantages of non-semestering were:

- having more time to cover the course and absorb ideas,
- subjects are covered in more depth, and
- not having the same courses every day and having a greater variety of courses.

b) What are some of the disadvantages of non-semestering?

The following disadvantages were most often cited:

- courses can drag out and become boring when extended over a whole year,
- fewer courses can be taken in a year,
- failing a course results in taking it for another year or at summer school, and
- one cannot graduate early.

8.a) In your opinion, should all courses, some courses or no courses be semestered?

	GROUP N-S		GROUP S	
	Grade 11	Grade 12	Grade 11	Grade 12
All	31.3%	18.2%	36.0%	19.7%
Most	29.7	33.3	56.0	57.6
A few	29.7	45.5	8.0	18.2
None	9.4	3.0	0.0	4.5

Although the majority of students in all samples indicated that "All" or "Most" courses should be semestered, two other trends seemed evident. It appeared that more students in Group S than Group N-S favoured having "All" or "Most" courses semestered. The figures also showed that more Grade 11 than Grade 12 students in both groups favoured having "All" courses semestered.

8. b) Considering the courses you have taken, which timetabling arrangement do you believe would be best for most courses in the following subject areas?

	ONE SEMESTER SESSION				TWO CONSECUTIVE SEMESTER SESSIONS				ONE FULL YEAR SESSION				OTHER			
	GROUP N-S		GROUP S		GROUP N-S		GROUP S		GROUP N-S		GROUP S		GROUP N-S		GROUP S	
	Gr.11	Gr.12	Gr.11	Gr.12	Gr.11	Gr.12	Gr.11	Gr.12	Gr.11	Gr.12	Gr.11	Gr.12	Gr.11	Gr.12	Gr.11	Gr.12
Art	50.0%*	60.6%	64.0%	59.1%	18.8%	24.2%	12.0%	10.6%	15.6%	12.1%	4.0%	9.1%	3.1%	0.0%	4.0%	1.5%
Music	37.5	57.6	48.0	45.5	28.1	18.2	16.0	12.1	9.4	21.2	12.0	16.7	3.1	0.0	0.0	1.5
Drama	34.4	54.5	60.0	56.1	28.1	15.2	16.0	12.1	9.4	27.3	4.0	7.6	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Commerce	37.5	39.4	60.0	63.6	25.0	15.2	4.0	9.1	18.8	30.3	12.0	1.5	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
English	28.1	21.2	52.0	57.6	25.0	33.3	20.0	24.2	31.3	45.5	20.0	13.6	3.1	0.0	4.0	1.5
Math	40.6	42.4	56.0	31.8	18.8	9.1	20.0	43.9	28.1	48.5	16.0	19.7	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Modern Languages	37.5	42.4	52.0	54.5	15.6	12.1	20.0	18.2	18.8	39.4	12.0	13.6	6.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Home Ec.	40.6	54.5	72.0	57.6	18.8	24.2	12.0	16.7	21.9	12.1	4.0	9.1	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
P.E.	43.8	27.3	36.0	60.6	21.9	33.3	28.0	21.2	25.0	39.4	32.0	13.6	3.1	0.0	0.0	1.5
Science	50.0	30 3	56.0	40.9	15.6	27.3	12.0	34.8	18.8	42.4	24.0	16,7	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5
Ind. Ed.	28.1	51.5	60.0	56.1	28.1	21.2	12.0	10.6	15.6	18.2	8.0	6.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Soc. St.	43.8	36.4	68.0	62.1	15.6	24.2	4.0	19.7	31.3	39.4	12.0	10.6	0.0	0.0	4.0	1.5
Guidance	50.0	66.7	68.0	62.1	12.5	12.1	12.0	9.1	15.6	21.2	4.0	7.6	3.1	0.0	12.0	7.6
Other	3.1	0.0	0.0	4.5	3.1	0.0	4.0	1.5	3.1	6.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

*Percentages across each row may not add to 100% since the proportions of students not responding have not been included.

In general, the above table shows a preference for one semester courses in most subject areas. However, there are some exceptions to this trend. For example, more Grade 12 students in Groups N-S and S preferred full year and two semester sessions, respectively, of mathematics than a single semester. It was also noted that somewhat more of the Group N-S students indicated a preference for a full year of English rather than a single semester. (It is interesting to examine the responses for other subjects by comparing preferences for a single semester session to the combination of both the 10-month options.)

9.a) How do (did) you find the pace of instruction in most non-semestered courses (i.e.,do (did) they seem to move too slowly or too quickly for you)?

	GROUP N-S		GROUP S	
	Grade 11	Grade 12	Grade 11	Grade 12
Much too slowly	6.3%	6.1%	24.0%	25.0%
A bit too slowly	28.1	37.9	40.0	40.9
Just about right	46.9	53.0	36.0	25.0
A bit too quickly	15.6	3.0	0.0	7.6
Much too quickly	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5
Blank	3.1	0.0	0.0	0.0

Responses to this item tended to reflect the type of school the students were now attending. Whereas many students found the pace of non-semestered courses to be "Just about right", considerably more of the students now attending semestered schools in comparison to those in non-semestered schools felt that non-semestered courses moved too slowly for them.

b) How did (do) you find the pace of instruction in most of the semestered courses you have taken?

	GROUP N-S		GROUP S	
	Grade 11	Grade 12	Grade 11	Grade 12
Much too slowly	4.7%	3.0%	0.0%	1.5%
A bit too slowly	10.9	0.0	8.0	6.1
Just about right	50.0	48.5	48.0	65.2
A bit too quickly	28.1	45.5	44.0	25.0
Much too quickly	6.3	3.0	0.0	0.8
Blank	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5

In general, most students in both groups indicated that the pace in semestered courses was "Just about right" or a "bit too quick" for them. It might also be noted that considerably more Grade 12 students in Group N-S than in Group S found these courses to move "A bit too quickly" whereas the reverse was evident with respect to the responses of Grade 11 students.

10. Please add further comments that you would like to make about semestered or non-semestered courses or systems.

Comments made by students in both groups tended to reiterate previously-made statements. The following were the most prominent themes:

- the semester system had advantages such as shorter courses with greater variety,
- one can repeat a failed course in the same year,
- certain courses should be taught over a full year, and
- a combination or choice of systems should be available.

OPINIONS OF PARENTS

Questionnaires were sent directly to parents of the students that were sampled and envelopes were provided for the return of completed forms to the Evaluation and Research Department. Of the more than 150 questionnaires sent out, 66 completed forms were received. Of the latter figure, 29 were from parents of students now at non-semestered schools (Group N-S) and 37 from parents with children attending semestered schools (Group S).

Most questionnaire items are repeated below along with the percentages for all response categories. Brief comments have been added in some cases to assist the reader.

Items 1(a) and 2 asked parents to indicate whether their child's secondary school was semestered or non-semestered and what proportion of the courses taken at the present and previous school were semestered or non-semestered. Responses were used to categorize parents as belonging to Group N-S or Group S.

1.b) In general, how would you rate the quality of education your child is receiving at his or her school?

	GROUP N-S	GROUP S
Excellent	10.3%	20.9
Good	48.3	64.2
Fair	37.9	11.5
Poor	3.4	3.4

Although the majority of parents rated the quality of education as "Excellent" or "Good", the proportions checking both these categories was higher in Group S than Group N-S.

3.a) How does your child seem to be enjoying this year at school?

	GROUP N-S	GROUP S
Very much	37.9%	55.4%
Somewhat	37.9	39.2
Not very much	20.7	2.7
Not at all	3.4	2.7

Although most parents indicated that their children were enjoying school "Very much" or "Somewhat", considerably more parents in Group S than Group N-S checked the "Very much" category.

b) Does your child seem to prefer non-semestered or semestered courses?

	GROUP N-S	GROUP S
Prefers non-semestered	27.6%	12.2%
Prefers semestered	55.2	79.7
No preference	13.8	5.4
Blank	3.4	2.7

Although the majority of parents thought their children preferred semestered courses, considerably more parents in Group S expressed this preference.

3.c) Which system do you think is best-suited to your child?

	GROUP N-S	GROUP S
Non-semestered	24.1%	16.2%
Semestered	48.3	75.7
No difference	13.8	8.1
Blank	13.8	0.0

Whereas approximately three-quarters of the Group S respondents thought that the semester system was best-suited to their child, slightly less than one-half of the parents in Group N-S believed this was the case. In general, the responses to Questions 3 (b) and (c) tended to correspond.

4.a) In your opinion, what are the advantages of the semester system or semestered courses?

The following advantages were cited most often by both groups:
- one can take more courses and a larger variety of courses,
- a failed subject can be repeated in the same year,
- one can have concentrated study of fewer subjects at one time,
- earlier graduation is possible, and
- the shorter courses tend to maintain student interest. (This was mentioned more often by Group S parents.)

b) In you opinion, what are the disadvantages of the semester system or semestered courses?

The most frequently mentioned disadvantages were:
- lack of time to cover the course in depth,
- the time for homework, assignments, etc. is less (i.e., everything seems rushed),
- length of time between consecutive courses in a subject area may be great, and
- less retention of knowledge. (This was mentioned most often by Group S parents.)

5.a) In your opinion, what are the advantages of the non-semester system or ten-month courses?

The advantages cited most often were:
- there was more time available and the pace was less hectic,
- there was continuity of subjects over the year and from year to year, and
- there was greater retention of knowledge.

b) In you opinion, what are the disadvantages of the non-semester system or ten-month courses?

The most-often mentioned disadvantages were:
- courses can get boring when spread over the whole year,
- not as many courses can be taken,
- one cannot graduate early, and
- failure can result in another year's work.

6. Which system do you prefer?

	GROUP N-S	GROUP S
Non-semester	34.5%	13.5%
Semester	41.4	70.3
No preference	17.2	10.8
Blank	6.9	5.4

Although parents in Group S showed a clear preference for the semester system, Group N-S was more evenly split in terms of their preferences. In comparing the responses to this item with those to Questions 3 (b) and (c), it appears that somewhat fewer parents preferred the semester system than thought their children preferred it or that believed it was the system best-suited for their children.

7.a) Why did you select the secondary school your son or daughter now attends?

	GROUP N-S	GROUP S
It was nearest school	60.3%	19.8%
It offered certain courses	8.6	22.5
It was semestered	0.0	29.3
It was non-semestered	6.9	0.0
Other	20.7	28.4
Blank	3.5	0.0

Whereas the majority of parents in Group N-S selected the school because it was nearest to their home, parents in Group S tended to choose the school for various reasons, e.g., it was semestered or offered certain courses. Some of the comments with respect to the "Other" category mentioned that the child had selected the school or that the school had a good reputation with regard to some particular aspect.

b) Did the school's being semestered or non-semestered have anything to do with your child's changing schools?

	GROUP N-S	GROUP S
Yes	20.7%	32.4%
No	75.9	62.2
Blank	3.5	5.4

Although somewhat more parents in Group S than Group N-S indicated that the school's being semestered had something to do with their child's changing schools, the majority of both groups stated that semestering was not a factor in the change of schools.

8. Please add any other comments that you would like to make about semestered or non-semestered courses or systems.

The most frequent comment made by both groups favoured having a choice of systems available for students or perhaps combining semestered and non-semestered courses within a school. Most of the remaining comments made by parents in Group S reiterated the advantages of the semester system. Other comments by Group N-S were more evenly divided in terms of preferences for the non-semester or semester systems.

OPINIONS OF TEACHERS

To gather some information regarding the opinions of teachers with respect to semestering, 25 teachers were selected at random from each of eight "semestered" schools and asked to complete a questionnaire. Returns were received from 171 of the 200 teachers who were invited to respond.

Most questionnaire items are repeated below along with the responses. In most cases, numbers have been converted to percentages. Brief comments have been added in some instances to assist the reader.

Item 1 asked teachers to indicate the number of courses they were teaching and how many, if any, were more than one semester in length. Although some teachers may have answered in terms of "classes" rather than "courses", the average number of courses reportedly taught was 4.4, of which an average of 3.4 were one semester long. The relatively few double-semestered courses tended to be in Mathematics, English, Band, or, to a lesser extent, Social Studies, Guidance and Physical Education.

2. Have you ever taught in a secondary school in which all or most of the courses were non-semestered?

Yes	76.7%
No	23.4%

If Yes, for how long?

Average — 7.1 years

If Yes, which system do you prefer?

Non-semestered	33.6%
Semestered	55.7%
Blank	10.7%

Approximately three-quarters of the teachers indicated that they had taught in a non-semestered school. The average length of time taught at such schools was 7.1 years.

Of those teachers with experience in both semester and non-semester systems, somewhat more than half indicated a preference for the semester system.

3.a) In general, how do the students seem to feel about semestering courses or the semester system?

Very positively	22.8%
Positively	59.4
Negatively	6.7
Very negatively	0.0
Blank	11.1

As can be seen, more than eighty percent of the teachers thought that the students felt "Very Positively" or "Positively" about semestered courses or the semester system.

3.b) In general, how do you feel about semestering courses or the semester system?

Very positively	23.1%
Positively	45.9
Negatively	21.1
Very negatively	6.4
Blank	3.5

Although the majority of teachers felt "Very positively" or "Positively" about semestering, the proportion who felt negatively was greater than that indicated with respect to students' feelings.

4.a) Do you think that all courses, some courses or no courses should be semestered?

All courses should be semestered	10.8%
Most should be semestered	53.2
A few should be semestered	30.4
None should be semestered	3.8
Blank	1.8

The majority of teachers thought that "Most" courses should be semestered. More teachers indicated that "A few" courses should be semestered than thought "All" should be semestered.

b) Referring to the list below, please indicate the subject area in which you teach and the method you favour in teaching most courses in that area.

	One Semester Session	Two Consecutive Semester Sessions	One Full Year Session	Other
Art	42.9%*	28.6%	14.3%	0.0%
Commerce	50.0	16.7	33.3	0.0
English	20.0	30.0	36.7	3.3
Mathematics	29.6	14.8	40.7	3.7
Modern Languages	12.5	12.5	62.5	0.0
Home Economics	54.5	27.3	9.1	0.0
Physical Education	11.8	58.8	23.5	0.0
Science	52.6	10.5	36.8	0.0
Industrial Education	70.8	0.0	20.8	0.0
Social Studies	44.8	20.7	20.7	0.0
Guidance	22.2	11.1	50.0	0.0
Music	0.0	0.0	87.5	0.0
Drama	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Library	0.0	25.0	75.0	0.0
Other	33.3	33.3	33.3	0.0

*Percentages across each row may not add to 100% since the proportions of teachers not responding have not been included.

Single semester sessions were favoured by the majority of teachers of Commerce, Home Economics, Science, Industrial Education and Drama. However, a clear majority of teachers of English, Mathematics, Modern Languages, Physical Education, Guidance, Music and Library favoured either two consecutive semester sessions or one full year session. (It is not obvious from the responses whether the two 10-month alternatives were distinguished by the teachers. It should also be noted that the number of teachers teaching some of the subject areas was very small. Thus, one should use some caution in generalizing from these results.)

5.a) In your opinion, what are the major advantages of semestering?

(i) generally:

Some of the general advantages mentioned most frequently were:
- the greater number and variety of courses offered,
- seeing students on a daily basis, (i.e., continuity),
- the opportunity for students to repeat failed courses in the same year,
- flexibility in timetabling,
- concentrated study,
- early graduation, and
- the change of teachers and students after five months.

(ii) in your subject area:

Similar comments to those cited above were mentioned:
- seeing students on a daily basis (i.e., continuity),
- greater variety of courses within subject area,
- opportunity to repeat a failed course, and
- concentrated study.

A number of teachers stated that there were no advantages within their subject area.

b) In your opinion, what are the major disadvantages of semestering?

(i) generally:

The major general disadvantages mentioned were:
- the lack of time to absorb course material,
- the lack of continuity and retention between consecutive courses in a particular subject area,
- the pressure on students and teachers, and
- absences being more crucial.

(ii) in your subject area:

The major disadvantages mentioned in response to this item were:
- lack of continuity and retention between consecutive courses,
- not enough time to absorb material, and
- not enough time for project work, reading, experiments, etc.

Again, a number of teachers mentioned that there were no disadvantages within their subject area.

c) How would you compare the advantages and disadvantages of semestering?

(i) generally:

Disadvantages outweigh advantages	25.1%
Advantages outweigh disadvantages	61.4
No difference	5.3
Blank	8.2

5.c) continued.
(ii) in your subject area:

Disadvantages outweigh advantages	33.3%
Advantages outweigh disadvantages	55.0
No difference	5.8
Blank	5.8

The majority of teachers indicated that the advantages of semestering outweighed the disadvantages, although there were slightly more teachers who thought this applied generally than within their subject area.

6. Please add any further comments that you would like to make about semestered courses or the semester system.

A variety of comments were made in response to this question. The most prominent themes were:

- courses with too much material for one semester should be redesigned,
- the semestered timetable was more flexible and students had more courses from which to choose,
- in favour of the semester system generally,
- teachers are under more pressure on the semester system, and
- students can make up failed courses more easily.

SUMMARY OF SECTION I

In general, the majority of all the students sampled preferred the semester system, although the proportion of students indicating this preference was smaller in the group now attending non-semestered schools. Advantages and disadvantages of both systems were mentioned with many of the comments focusing on the speed with which courses were completed. Many students also indicated that they would prefer a combination of semestered and full year courses.

In general, the majority of parents rated the quality of their children's education as being "Excellent" or "Good", thought that their children were enjoying this year at school and believed that their children preferred semestered courses. The advantages and disadvantages mentioned by parents were similar to those stated by students as many comments focussed on the time available for teaching and learning. More parents expressed a personal preference for the semester system over the non-semester system, although preferences were much more evenly divided in Group N-S. Some parents selected their children's school because it was semestered but the majority of parents stated that semestering was not a factor in their children's changing schools.

Responses to the teachers' questionnaire showed that most of the courses taught were one semester in length. The majority of those teachers who had taught in both systems preferred the semester system and most teachers also believed that students felt positively about semestering. The majority of the teachers sampled indicated that most courses should be semestered although responses varied from subject to subject as to whether a single semester or 10-month session should be employed for that subject area. Advantages and disadvantages of semestering were mentioned but most teachers felt that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

II SUMMARY OF COMMENTS BY COORDINATORS

The following summaries present the concerns of coordinators regarding the operation of courses within their subject area.

MUSIC

Music programs seemed to be particularly affected by semestering. This was especially apparent with respect to instrumental or choral groups who were sometimes asked to perform long after their single semester of instruction was complete. The need was strongly expressed for a continuous program of instruction thoughout the year.

Some success was reported in some schools when Music was paired with another subject and both were given in alternate periods over the entire year. Another school had apparently improved their accommodation of Music programs somewhat through an extended day. However, the recruitment and maintaining of staff in some schools was negatively affected by semestering.

ART

Some concern was expressed that the coverage of semestered courses tended to be superficial. The time allotted for Grade 8 Art was of special concern. Despite the mention of serious problems, Art teachers apparently felt that the advantages of semestering outweighed the disadvantages.

To provide for more continuous instruction, some schools had timetables with Art sharing time with other subject areas. However, Art often had a fraction of the time of other subjects. This seemed to be promoting a competition for students.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT

Semestering does not seem to have enhanced work experience programs. The problem may be that semestered schools are really not flexible enough to allow absences, since absences are more critical in semestered schools. There is also a tendency to overuse semestered schools in the second semester with regard to the placement of students. This tends to put extra burden on these schools.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Semestering provides an advantage to those students in English as a Second Language classes who are ready to go into a regular program since they can enter at the beginning of the second semester rather than start into a program already underway in a non-semestered school. Slow learners also have the opportunity to arrange a better or more appropriate timetable in the second semester.

BUSINESS EDUCATION

Business Education teachers were generally critical of semestering mainly because of the lack of continuity in skill development courses. It also appears that standards decrease with the loss of time and there is no chance to personalize the skills in a short time. Semestering produced poorer utilization of staff and rooms. Since many students take core subjects in the first semester and electives in the second, teachers may have to teach an entirely different subject in each semester. Some teachers claimed there were actually fewer electives in semestered schools as core subjects were often extended.

BUSINESS EDUCATION - continued

Business orientation or work experience programs also suffered as students felt they could not afford to be away from school for a week. Some two-day programs have apparently been tried, though.

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

In general, the disadvantages of semestering were thought to outweigh the advantages. Although daily Physical Education resulted in good attitudes and good staff-student relationships, students received less Physical Education and students could miss certain seasonal activities if they took just one semester of Physical Education. Another disadvantage was the poor effect on the athletic program, especially with regard to younger students who tended not to join if they were not involved in the first semester. It was also noted that additional demands could be placed on equipment if programs covered only half a year and that some teachers found the daily exposure and teaching situation very difficult.

COUNSELLING

The negative aspects of semestering included the increased paper work because of time-tabling twice in a year, some students losing the continuity of courses and spending more counselling time on Cross Boundary students during enrollment and orientation to a new school.

Positive characteristics were that students has more flexible programs and a greater variety in course choices, students were provided with short-term goals, there was more intensive concentration as subjects were taken every day, students could graduate earlier and it provided an alternative to a regular year-long school schedule.

HOME ECONOMICS

The strengths of semestering were that students could take two extra elective courses per year, that they have time to make up for failures, that they can graduate earlier, that courses are more effectively taught and students have continuity of material, and that students have a better choice of subject loading in Grades 11 and 12. Semestering has increased the demand for Home Economics in some schools but schools in which academic subjects are double-semestered have definitely reduced elective areas such as Home Economics. Other strengths were that the teacher has fewer single preparations each semester and meets fewer pupils in a given time space and that most courses are modified with extraneous material removed.

Weaknesses of semestering include the greater pressure on teachers since final gradings are prepared twice yearly, the greater pressure on counsellors since two timetables must be produced and the provision of two semesters for some academic 11 and 12 courses in some schools.

SUMMARY OF SECTION II

In short, coordinators raised several areas of concern within the semester system. However, it would appear that coordinators of Music, Business Education and Physical Education were most concerned about the effects of semestering on their programs. Although various solutions have been tried in different schools to alleviate these concerns, the coordinators did not appear to be aware of general remedies.

III SUMMARY OF COMMENTS BY CHAIRPERSONS OF DEPARTMENT HEADS

Comments were heard from the chairpersons of the department heads from five subject areas. These representatives were asked to give their group's general reaction to semestering along with any other concerns of their group.

SCIENCE

Semestering allowed for an availability of more courses, flexible timetabling and, whereas single semesters suited Science 8 and 10, double semesters were good for senior courses. The extra work load and pressure, quick pace of instruction and lack of in-depth study were seen as disadvantages. In comparing a semestered and non-semestered school, there was about 60 hours more instruction in Science over a five year period in the non-semestered school. In general, courses had not been modified to suit the semester system.

MATHEMATICS

It was thought that semestering allowed for fewer opportunities for enrichment in Mathematics. It was pointed out that since 1954 there had been a progressive reduction in the amount of time allotted for Mathematics instruction in secondary schools. The increased pressures of semestering were noted. Although the representative liked the continuity of instruction over a 10-month period, he personally preferred semestering to an "8x5" timetable.

MODERN LANGUAGES

It was reported that all but two of the Department Heads in this subject area were opposed to semestering and one of these two would see semestering applied to students in Grade 8 only. The other Department Head would not want to have semestering at the Grade 11 or 12 level but believed semestering made possible more choices of courses. Problems were seen in the transferring of students and teachers from one system to another and the retention of knowledge over several months. It was also acknowledged that it would be psychologically very difficult to change from a semestered system back to a non-semestered system. It was suggested that to students take four consecutive semesters to cover the Modern Language courses in Grades 10, 11 and 12.

ENGLISH

There was concern for the reduced number of hours in semestered courses and retention over the time gap between consecutive English courses. It was also noted that time was lost in the double "wind-up" and "wind-down" periods in a semestered year. It was felt that time was needed to assimilate the concepts in English and that there was no merit in hurrying through a course in five months. Unfair competition for scholarship awards was also a concern as students with 90, 120 and 180 hours of instruction would all be writing the same examination. The needs of junior and senior students were different and the tendency was to cater to seniors. Even in an "8x5" timetable, less time was being spent on English 8 than was called for in the provincial guidelines. In summary, although some deparment heads believed that semestering allowed for some flexibility, it was thought that a vote would favour the non-semester system for the teaching of English.

SOCIAL STUDIES

The major concern appeared to be the lack of sufficient time to do justice to the senior courses in Social Studies. It was felt that, in general, department heads of Social Studies would not favour the semester system.

SUMMARY OF SECTION III

The chairpersons for the department heads of five subject areas mentioned many areas of concern regarding the teaching of their subjects within the semester system. Most seemed to feel that the time allotted in semestered courses was insufficient to do justice to the course material and to allow students to assimilate concepts. Although some advantages of semestering were recognized, the chairpersons thought that most of the department heads would favour the non-semester system for the teaching of their subject.

IV OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN

Two specific areas of concern raised in the previous report (Research Report 75-01) dealt with the loss of instructional time as a result of semestering and the redesigning of courses of the semester system. This section of the present report addresses itself to these concerns.

LOSS OF INSTRUCTIONAL TIME

This issue is a very real one for administrators of semestered schools. Semestered courses consist of approximately 90 hours of instruction whereas a non-semestered course normally has about 120 hours. While students in semestered schools may take more courses per year and are exposed to greater "chunks" of course content per day and week than students taking a similar course in a non-semestered school, semestered courses still involve some 30 fewer hours of instruction than non-semestered courses.

The most common means of dealing with this descrepancy has been double-semestering. Some schools double-semester particular basic subjects, often at the Grade 12 level but sometimes in the junior grades instead of or in addition to doubling the hours in Grade 12. Although double-semestering clearly resolves the lack of instructional time issue, at least for that particular year, it does affect a frequently mentioned advantage of semestering, the flexibility of timetabling. Thus, as more courses are double-semestered, fewer options are available in that year. If the double-semestered courses are not sequential in their development of skills, students may be given the option of taking them simultaneously in the same semester. Additional hours in a particular subject might also be gained by combining two subject areas (e.g., Mathematics and Science) for students considering specialization.

In short, however, schools may differ considerably in the number of hours a student may take over a five year period in a particular subject area. The following table provides a comparison of two semestered schools, (A and B), with a non-semestered school in terms of the number of hours of instruction a student might receive in his or her secondary school career in each of five subjects. (Although these schools were not picked at random, the data in the table below may help to express the discrepancy in more specific terms.)

TOTAL HOURS OF INSTRUCTION IN FIVE YEARS

Subject	Semestered Schools		Non-Semestered Schools
	A	B	
English	630	630-720	600
Mathematics	585	630	600
Social Studies	450	540	600
Science	495	540	600
Physical Education	504	450	408

As can be seen, the semestered schools may offer students more hours in some subject areas but fewer hours in others. Both semestered schools require students to take two semesters of English at each of two grade levels and one school offers an additional 90 hours to students oriented toward post-secondary education. One semestered school double-semestered Mathematics at two grade levels whereas the other required students to take one double-semester session of Mathematics and a combined Math/Science course. Whereas students taking a Social Studies or Science course each year would lose considerable instructional time over five years, they would gain in terms of the hours devoted to Physical Education.

The methods employed to deal with loss of instructional time obviously vary from school to school. Such factors as the number of students and staff (and their attitudes) undoubtedly affect the amount of flexibility one can have in any timetable. Certain decisions obviously have to be made as to which courses and what grade levels should be double-semestered. It is perhaps not surprising that teachers of various subject areas feel that their courses should be double-semestered. This leads us to a consideration of the closely related issue of the redesigning of semestered courses.

REDESIGNING OF SEMESTERED COURSES

A frequent comment of all those involved with semestering is the feeling that teaching and learning must proceed at a hectic pace if the course material is to be covered. The amount of material actually covered probably varies considerably from class to class. Obviously, an attempt is made to identify the "core" of the course and "superfluous" material is discarded. It remains a moot point as to whether this uncovered material is essential to the "course".

This point would remain an academic one were it not for the inevitable comparison between graduates of semestered and non-semestered courses: since both groups get credit for the course, logic dictates that the courses should be equivalent. This is especially critical to students writing scholarship examinations. A student who has had 90 hours of instruction is at a disadvantage to a student with 120 hours of instruction unless the former candidate does considerable preparation outside of class.

Teachers in some subject areas would welcome more direction with respect to this issue. Are they expected to cover the same material in fewer hours? If so, how is this possible? Are different teaching strategies, for example, to be employed to meet this end? If not, what material is to be retained or discarded and who makes this decision? If material is dropped, should semestered courses be equated to non-semestered courses, especially when such comparative situations as scholarship examinations are considered? In short, do the differences between semestered and non-semestered courses become formalized or do semestered schools continue to modify courses and allot more time to particular subjects through changes in timetabling?

V SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The investigations presented in the report resulted from reaction to a previous report entitled "The Semester System in Vancouver Schools and its Effects on Curriculum" (Research Report 75-01). Surveys of the opinions of students, parents and teachers regarding semestering were undertaken and the findings are discussed. Comments were also solicited from coordinators and from the chairpersons of department heads of five subject areas and these are reported. Two issues accompanying semestering, i.e., loss of instructional time and the redesigning of courses, raised some concerned reaction in the previous report and are further discussed in the present paper.

The results of the questionnaire surveys of the opinions of students, parents and teachers generally showed a positive reaction of all three groups towards semestering. Although many disadvantages of semestering were noted, most respondents thought that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. A good deal of support was evident for timetables which combined semestered and full-year courses. Thus, particular courses, usually at the Grade 12 level and considered to be "heavy" and academic, could be given more in-depth coverage over the entire year, whereas others could remain semestered. The appeal of semestered courses was considerable, however, and many students preferred semestered courses in general to those which lasted 10 months.

Although teachers also saw certain disadvantages to semestering, the majority of the group sampled preferred the semester to the non-semester system. No rigorous sampling of teachers by subject area and grade level taught was attempted but it was noted that more teachers of Music, Physical Education and Modern Languages in particular, and, to a lesser extent, English and Mathematics, favoured teaching sessions of 10 months rather than semestered courses. This is somewhat surprising, however, in that further analysis of the teachers' responses showed that teachers in all subjects but Music indicated that, in general, they felt positively about semestering. Although generalizations must be made with caution as small numbers of teachers were representing certain subject areas, some speculation does seem warranted to explain these apparently contradictory findings.

Perhaps it seems reasonable to conclude, then, that although some teachers favour 10-month sessions for their subject area, they would like to see such sessions occur within the semester system. In other words, the advantages of the system are attractive generally but would be very appealing indeed if certain timetabling concessions could be made with respect to their subject area.

Another confounding factor which was not addressed in the present investigation but bears mention is the grade level at which instruction occurs. The perceived needs of junior and senior students may differ considerably and, whereas 10-month sessions might be favoured for senior students, semestered courses might be thought to be well-suited to the junior grades. This possibility receives at least some support from the comments of some of the students sampled. However, a less frequently expressed view argues that the junior grades might best be non-semestered to provide these students with a better background in certain subjects.

The reaction of coordinators and department heads' representatives was generally negative towards semestering. Although some advantages of the semester system were mentioned, many of the coordinators and chairpersons felt that five month courses were simply not long enough to develop adequately the skills in their particular subject area. Whereas the concerns of persons associated with Music and Physical Education, for example, might be alleviated by sharing a year's timetable with another subject, other concerns seemed more difficult to resolve. Double-semestering, especially at the Grade 12 level, might help but, except for Mathematics and Science, timetable restrictions prohibit this being done in most schools.

The contradiction between the relatively positive feelings of the students, parents and teachers sampled and the negative comments of coordinators and chairpersons is obvious. Whether the samples which were surveyed are biased or represent views of different aspects of semestering than those of the two other groups is a moot point. Perhaps one might assume that semestering tends to polarize opinion depending upon one's perspective of the issue. For example, many students enjoy it because courses go by quickly and they find the constant change to be exciting; parents prefer it because their children appear to be enjoying school; teachers generally favour semestering but would be happier if more time was allowed for covering course material; and, senior teachers and consultants react negatively because semestering may decrease the time allotted to their subject area and cause further debate as to what is an equitable sharing of a student's timetable.

One issue that is not commonly raised but which should not be overlooked is the difference in the teaching load. In the normal 10-month schedule, the typical teacher teaches for six of the seven blocks (or seven of the eight blocks in an eight block timetable) and has 14 2/7% (or 12½%) of the time uncommitted for regular class instruction. In the semester system, on the other hand, the teacher is usually committed to four of five blocks of class instruction and has 20% of the time uncommitted. However, it is in these periods that many teachers provide tutoring and remedial services to individual students and small groups. Furthermore, the greater pressures of the semester system would seem to make necessary a reduction in the teaching load with respect not only to the proportion of time committed to class instruction but also to the number of course preparations at any one time.

The reviewer noted an apparent inconsistency in that while teachers in general and department heads in particular considered that the semester scheme did not allow sufficient time to do justice to the courses in their subject areas, teachers, as well as students and parents, expressed a preference for semestering. Furthermore, they liked the semester system despite the fact that it placed greater pressure on teachers and administrators.

Instructional time loss and the redesigning of courses were major concerns of personnel in semestered schools. The dilemma remains as to whether or not semestered courses are to be formally redesigned and, if so, how can they be compared with similar non-semestered courses. Direction must also be given to resolve the question as to which courses at what level are to be double-semestered if this tactic is to continue to be used to equalize the time devoted to semestered and non-semestered courses.

In summary, the following conclusions seem warranted as a result of this further investigation of semestering in Vancouver schools:

(a) Students who have experienced both semester and non-semester systems see advantages and disadvantages in both systems but generally prefer (52%-92%) the semester system. Their parents tend to agree with this preference (41%-70%).

(b) Teachers in semestered schools, most of whom had taught in a non-semestered system, see advantages and disadvantages to semestering but most (56%) prefer the semester system. Teachers of certain subject areas would prefer 10-month sessions for their courses.

(c) Coordinators and department heads generally favour 10-month courses for their subject areas.

(d) The issues of instructional time discrepancies between semestered and non-semestered courses and the redesigning of semestered courses should be given serious consideration.

(e) The evidence presented by this report tends to reaffirm the recommendations made by the committee which produced Research Report 75-01 (see Appendix A).

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SEMESTERING COMMITTEE

Recommendation 1

THAT the semester plan be continued because it is one way of facilitating the provision of alternatives in the school system (e.g., mini-courses, locally-developed courses, early graduation, etc.) and makes possible a broader range of course offerings.

Recommendation 2

THAT the advantages and disadvantages of semestering a course be carefully considered at the school level and that curriculum development and course modification necessary to tailor the courses to suit the semester system be encouraged where the advantages are apparent and where assurance is given that standards will be maintained. Those courses that are to be offered as double semestered courses should be selected with discretion as the double semestering of courses reduces the number of options and restricts the flexibility in programming.

Recommendation 3

THAT the semester system continue to be monitored and re-examined systematically with particular attention to its impact on student achievement at the Grade 10 and Grade 12 levels.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Bill Blake
Bob Brett
Beverley Buchanan
Norm Ellis
Fred Greaves
Walter Moult
Bob Muir
Bob Pyke
Bob Stevens

October 26th, 1976

APPENDIX A: Recommendations from Research Report 75-01 (P.23)

Recommendations:

It is recommended:

1) That the semester plan be continued because it is one way of facilitating the provision of alternatives in the school system (e.g., mini-courses, locally-developed courses, early graduation, etc.) and makes possible a broader range of course offerings.

2) That curriculum development and course modification be encouraged so as to provide courses which are tailored for the semester system. (It is important that adequate time be provided for core courses and for English in particular.)

3) That a committee give careful consideration to the content of selected courses and to the merits of semestering them, with a view to suggesting ones that might best be offered as double-semester courses (e.g., En.12, En.8, En.9, Ma.8, Ma.9, Hi.12, etc.).

4) That there be a commitment to continue to monitor the semester systems being implemented in Vancouver schools and to re-examine systematically their impact on student achievement at the Grade 10 and Grade 12 levels.

April 7, 1975

Committee members:

Bill Blake
Walter Moult
Norm Ellis
Bob Muir
Norman Gleadow

APPENDIX B: Types and Frequencies of School Organizations in B.C.
(from "Organization of Secondary Schools and Elementary and Secondary Class Sizes, 1975-76", P.24)

EDUCATIONAL DATA SERVICES
DIVISION OF COMMUNICATIONS
B.C. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

TABLE 2 Source: September 30, 1975 Form K

F - School Organization for Schools Enroling Secondary Students

1. By Type of School

	10-Month	Two Semester	Three Semester	Four Semester	Partial Semester & Partial 10-Month	Total
Senior Secondary	4	15	-	-	4	23
Secondary	45	34	1	4	36	120
Junior Secondary	39	14	2	16	43	114
Elementary-Senior Secondary	8	2	-	-	3	13
Elementary-Junior Secondary	34	2	-	1	4	41
Special	-	-	-	-	-	-
Totals	130	67	3	21	90	311

2. By Size of School

	10-Month	Two Semester	Three Semester	Four Semester	Partial Semester & Partial 10-Month	Total
2000 or more	2	2	-	-	3	7
1000-1999	14	17	-	-	17	48
500 -999	53	35	2	16	51	157
250 -499	27	12	1	4	13	57
100 -249	24	1	-	1	4	30
0 -99	10	-	-	-	2	12
Totals	130	67	3	21	90	311

APPENDIX C: FINDINGS OF A STUDY IN ALBERTA

School Year Reorganization: Research for Decision-Making*

John J. Bergen (U. of Alta.)
David Friesen (U. of Alta.)
Eugene W. Ratsoy (U. of Alta.)

The trimester system of school year organization was introduced at the Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School in Red Deer, Alberta, in 1949, and has remained in substantially the same form to this day.

The Board of School Trustees raised the following questions:

(1) Is the trimester system justified in view of the fact that most Alberta schools, then on the ten-month school year, are now organized on the semester basis?

(2) Does the trimester still have advantages over other forms of school organization? What are its advantages?

(3) Is a change justified, or ought modifications be made to the present system?

The major challenges facing the research team were the following:

(1) What information should be provided to the Board of Trustees in order to assist them in understanding the problem?

(2) What alternative courses of action might be recommended to the Board?

An attempt was made to summarize research findings and professional opinions.

The majority of the research studies indicate that reorganization of the school year in terms of semester, trimester or four-quarter rather than the ten-month year will result in little or no change in student achievement.

Both research findings and professional opinion are fairly evenly divided on the issue of learning retention.

The weight of professional opinion in regard to effects on curriculum suggests that benefits such as more flexibility in type of course offerings, more variety within courses, and greater enrichment opportunities accrue from school year reorganization, particularly in the 45-15, four-quarter and trimester approaches.

The majority of students do not experience any difficulties related to extra-curricular activites either under the semester system or the four-quarter system.

There is a dearth of professional opinion on this topic, the one criticism being that the 45-15 school year organization was incompatible with the scheduling of extra-curricular activity.

APPENDIX C (continued)

Two studies failed to reveal any additional problems for students resulting from lack of articulation between high school and university programs because of school year reorganization.

One study reported no change in "persistence patterns", and another reported a significant reduction in the drop-out rate.

Professional opinion is that school year reorganization will result in a reduction of the drop-out rate.

Professional opinion is divided on the question of whether economics of space or money can be expected as a result of the various kinds of reorganization.

Both research findings and professional opinion suggest that student satisfaction may be favourably affected by school year reorganization. There is a lack of conclusive evidence concerning the most preferred type of reorganization.

Some educators are of the opinion that the semester system may pose problems for students transferring in. However, opinion on this issue is not unanimous.

There is an absence of expressed professional opinion concerning whether teachers would be more satisfied or would perform better under a particular system of reorganization, though it has been suggested that benefits such as year round employment, extended study leaves and less lesson preparation time may accrue. However, disadvantages from the teachers' viewpoint could be such factors as extra demands in the form of increased marking loads, increased examination preparation and increased stress.

Parents appear to be supportive of most efforts to reorganize the school year. However, two writers warn of possible resistance by parents if school year reorganization disrupts family life.

The Varner U.S.A. study (1968) suggested that the most preferred type of reorganization was the present 180 days plus a summer vacation and the least preferred types were the rotating four-quarter and the rotating trimester.

It appears that parents would like more intensive use made of school facilities, and that they are more willing to accept school year reorganization if improved quality of education rather than dollar savings will result.

The researchers saw the problem essentially as one of obtaining a maximum amount of information about the trimester system at LTCHS. This would make possible informed decision making on the future of the trimester system. In order to obtain the necessary information, the researchers contacted school board members, parents, teachers, students and other community members.

The bulk of information for the study was gathered by means of questionnaires.

The responses of parents, students and teachers are summarized and major issues arising from the findings are discussed. The researchers propose an alternative to the trimester system.

*Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education and the Canadian Educational Researchers Association, Laval University, Quebec, June 3rd, 1976.